

*LECTIO DIVINA (1):*  
PATH TO CONTEMPLATION AND COMPASSION

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**We all need to pray.** We are creatures of God, God's children, baptized in the Blessed Trinity. We are weak and needy: "Beggars of God" (St. Augustine). "Apart from me," Jesus says, "you can do nothing" (Jn 15:5). We need to pray especially today: there is generally too much action and noise, and little interior silence.

For every follower of Jesus, the prayerful one, **prayer** is a need and an obligation. It has been said that at times **Jesus** did not have time to eat; at times, He did not have time to sleep, but He always had time to pray (Cardinal Joseph Bernardin).

#### PRAYER AND *LECTIO DIVINA*

We need to pray. We are obliged to pray – constantly: "Pray always and never lose heart" (Lk 18:1; Cf. I Thes 5:17; Ac 1: 12-14). **How do we learn to pray?** Saint Mother Teresa of Calcutta answers: "By praying." Is it difficult to practice prayer, contemplation? The Master of Novices answered a novice by giving him the two great laws of prayer: the first law is to pray, and the second is to keep at it."

**Prayer** is a conversation with God, "the thing that can conquer God" (Tertullian). It is "the lifting up of mind and heart to God" (St. John Damascene). It is the breathing of the soul, feeling God's presence in our lives, and communicating with him. Prayer is the language of the heart in love with God. St. Teresa of Avila defines prayer as "A dialogue of friendship, being alone (silently) many times (frequently) with the One we know that loves us." She could not understand why the whole world does not try to approach God through this particular friendship.

There are **different kinds of prayer**, such as vocal and mental prayer, personal and communitarian prayer...There are also **different methods or ways to practice prayer**. Among them, ***lectio divina***.

Probably many of us continue trying to practice *lectio divina* either individually or in groups. We continue trying and often failing! Never mind, we continue trying. I am consoled by the words of the theologian sister Dolores Aleixandre commenting on her practice of *lectio divina*: "In the midst of so many attempts and of limping through it, I continue thinking that I do not know how to pray; but I am consoled by the thought that the contrary (thinking that I already know how to pray) would be much worse." So, my dear readers, I invite you to try *lectio divina* again! And let us not let our distractions on the journey stop us!

I shall try to develop this wonderful topic in three pieces. This first piece is on the preparation required to practice *lectio divina*. We start with a general introduction.

#### INTRODUCING *LECTIO DIVINA*

In our Christian tradition, an old way of meditative and contemplative prayer has become again very relevant throughout the world. This way of prayer is called *lectio divina* (divine or sacred reading), which is a cycle composed of four moments or steps, namely, *lectio* (reading), *meditatio* (meditation), *oratio* (prayer), and *contemplatio* (contemplation).

A monastic and patristic tradition, *lectio divina* was well formulated by Guigo II (1115-1198), a Carthusian monk at Chartres, who writes: "One day during manual work, as I was beginning to reflect on the spiritual exercise of man, suddenly **four spiritual steps** appeared to my mind: reading, meditation, prayer, and contemplation. This is the ladder of the monks by which they are elevated from the earth to heaven and even though only a few steps may form it, nevertheless it appears an immense and incredible greatness."

Guigo II describes the four "rungs" on the ladder of perfection thus:

**Reading** comes first, and it is as it were the foundation; it provides the subject matter which we must use for meditation. **Meditation** considers more carefully what is to be sought after; it digs, as it were, for treasure which it finds and reveals, but since it is not in meditation's power to seize upon the treasure, it directs us to prayer. **Prayer** lifts itself up to God with all its strength, and begs for the treasure which it longs for, which is the sweetness of contemplation. **Contemplation**, when it comes, rewards the labors of the other three; it inebriates the thirsting soul with the dew of heavenly sweetness. Reading is an exercise of the outward senses. Meditation is concerned with the inward understanding, prayer is concerned with desire, and contemplation outstrips every faculty.

Guigo II continues: "Reading without meditation is sterile; meditation without reading is liable to error; prayer without meditation is lukewarm; meditation without prayer is unfruitful; prayer, when it is fervent, wins contemplation, but to obtain contemplation without prayer would be rare, even miraculous." (Quoted by Jordan Aumann, OP, *Christian Spirituality in the Catholic Tradition*)

The specific objective of *lectio divina* is to lead us to contemplation – a contemplation that is part of evangelization and urges us to a more passionate evangelizing mission. In our liturgical or private prayer, we may go through the four moments, but we may choose one, or two, or three among them. The four moments cross each other and fertilize each other.

#### PREPARATION

For any kind of prayer, we need the appropriate preparation. Thus, the four classical steps of *lectio divina* begin with **preparation**.

According to tradition, certain premises are required to engage properly in *lectio divina*. The main premises are: faith, communion with the Church, and **an attitude of continuing conversion**.

Prayer time is God's time, quality time with God. When we pray, therefore, we are collected, **recollected** - not scattered. When we pray, we are **humbly present before God**. Prayer is the language of humility. Without humility, progress in prayer is not possible. When we pray, we are **humbly penitent**: we are sinners like the publican (Mt 6:5-6). In God's presence, we confess: "Lord, I am sorry," and ask for his **forgiveness** – and we forgive others (Mt 6:14-15). We remember the words of the Lord: "When you stand to pray, forgive anyone against whom you have a grievance so that your heavenly Father may in turn forgive you your faults" (Mk 11:26).

We are going to pray, and therefore, we are attuned to God in a **humble, attentive and loving attitude**. When one eagerly awaits to open the door of *lectio divina*, "One needs to be in tune with what is going to be done" (D. de Pablo Maroto). We attempt at ousting from our soul all worldly thoughts and concerns. We try to empty ourselves from our fat ego to give space to God – only to God with whom we wish to converse in a deeper way.

It is good to close the preparation for *lectio divina* by invoking **the intercession of the Holy Spirit**. The Holy Spirit is so essential in our prayer life, that without his help we cannot pray: "No one can say 'Lord' except by the Holy Spirit" (I Cor 12:3), who cries out from our hearts, "Abba Father" (Gal 4:6). Indeed, "the Spirit helps us in our weakness, for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words" (Rom 8:26).

**Ready to continue?** In our next piece, we develop the first three stages of *lectio divina*, namely reading, meditation and prayer.